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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the position that concern for others is fundamentally a matter of cognitive definition of one's relationship to and responsibility for other human beings. Altruism changes as a function of an individual's overall level of cognitive-moral development. There are six forms of altruism, corresponding to Kohlberg's six sequential moral stages--moving from a belief that everyone is responsible for his own welfare to a fully universalized concern for others that transcends personal or group ties, such as was displayed by the Good Samaritan. Research is reviewed which demonstrates a strong relationship between a person's stage of moral reasoning and his response to a victim in distress. The paper concludes, however, that altruism which serves the interest of others at the expense of the self goes beyond the requirements of morality into the realm of love. Statements of Martin Luther King are cited in support of this thesis. (Author)

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A Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Altruism

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I. A Cognitive-Developmental Perspective on the Good Samaritan

I would like to begin where Ted Huston left off in his discussion of the good Samaritan. I would like to suggest that the reason the Samaritan came to the aid of a Jew, despite the fact that mutual hatred long existed between Jew and Samaritan, was that he had reached the highest level of moral principles in Kohlberg's stage sequence of cognitive-moral reasoning. That is only an educated guess, of course, since you cannot directly infer moral stage from a particular behavior, but it's a good guess, I think, in view of the fact that the Samaritan acted without social pressure or reward, at considerable personal expense and effort, to help a native of a land in which Samaritans were traditionally despised.

He may also have acted at considerable personal risk. In preparing this paper, I came across a collection of sermons by Martin Luther King (1963), one of which dealt with the ancient question, what does it mean to be a good neighbor? King tells of the time when he and Mrs. King visited the Holy Land, rented a car, and drove from Jerusalem to Jericho, the route traveled by the good Samaritan. It is, King reports, a meandering, mountainous road, descending sharply from Jerusalem, 2000 feet above sea level, to Jericho, some 1000 feet below sea level.

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Many sudden curves provide likely places for ambushing and expose the traveler to unforeseen attacks. The road was once known as Bloody Pass. So it is quite possible, King says, that the priest and the Levite in the parable, who passed by the beaten man, were afraid that if they stopped, they too would be beaten. Perhaps the robbers were still nearby. Or perhaps the wounded man on the ground was a faker, who wished to draw passing travelers to his side for quick and easy seizure. King speculates that the priest and the Levite may well have asked themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" The good Samaritan, by the very nature of his concern, reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" Motivated by that concern, he was capable of a dangerous altruism.

The dictionary defines altruism as "regard for, or devotion to, the interest of others." The dictionary opposite of altruism is egoism. The good Samaritan was altrusitic to the core, King says, because he made concern for others the first law of his life.

A cognitive-developmental view of the good Samaritan would see his altruistic concern for others as springing at least in part from the highest level of cognitive-moral development, at which the fundamental moral principle is respect for persons. This respect for the dignity, rights, and needs of other persons carries a responsibility for their welfare, a responsibility that one would like any human being to feel for the welfare of any other human being. At this highest stage of moral development, Kohlberg (1971) states, responsibility is felt for other people "whether or not they have a personal tie to the actor or

are members of the same civil society." The Samaritan, as King points out, exemplified this capacity for universal altruism. While the priest and the Levite appear to have seen only a bleeding body, not a human being like themselves, the good Samaritan saw the robbed and beaten Jew as a fellow human being in need of help. The altruistic man, King concludes, does not limit his neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation, but rather looks beyond these external characteristics to discern those inner qualities that make all men and women human, and therefore responsible for each other.

From a cognitive-developmental perspective, this universalized concern for others is fundamentally a matter of cognition, of how you perceive other people and how you define your responsibilities to them. This analysis may sound pretty cold-blooded, relegating affect to an insignificant role. Not so. As philosopher Richard Peters (1970) points out, "the usual contrast between reason and feeling is misconceived." Rational people are able to stand firm, Peters says, to hold to and act on what they believe to be right, even if the face of social pressure, "only if they are passionately devoted to fairness, freedom, and the pursuit of truth." Conversely, if a person has a genuine, principled respect for others, he will be intensely concerned when they suffer. Strong affect, then, can be conceived as "the passionate side of the life of reason."

As moral reasoning develops, so does the breadth and the depth of altruistic concern. This is the core concept of a cognitive-developmental approach to altruism: it changes as a function of the individual's overall level of moral development. The debate among psychologists over how to

define altruism needs to be anchored in a cognitive-developmental framework which recognizes that there is not one form of altruism, but six -- each corresponding to one of six sequential moral stages.

II. Stages in the Development of Moral Reasoning about Responsibility for the Welfare of Others

Kohlberg's moral stages (1969, 1975) are well-known; I will only briefly highlight six major points of his theory and then indicate how altruism changes as one moves through the stage sequence.

(1) The concepts used to define Kohlberg's moral stages derive from moral philosophy -- from the idea that the core of morality is justice, which includes the issue of responsbility for the welfare of others. Justice requires you to treat all human beings with respect, that is, to consider every man's claim or needs equally, impartially, and reciprocally -- what holds for one holds for all.

(2) There are 6 moral stages, which Kohlberg has delineated on the basis of cross-cultural research in more than a half-dozen countries, experimental studies in accelerating moral stage development, and a longitudinal investigation of 50 boys that has been in progress for the last 16 years. These six stages represent progressively better -- that is, more consistent and more universalized -- expressions of the equality and reciprocity that constitute justice.

(3) The stages are held to be constructed by the individual as he tries to make sense out of his social experience, rather than implanted by the culture through socialization.

(4) The stages are general modes of thinking, implying a certain

amount of consistency in moral reasoning across different moral problems and situations.

(5) The stages are hierarchical, one building on the other, transforming early and incomplete forms of concern for others into increasingly sensitive and generalized respect for persons.

(6) Finally -- perhaps the most controversial of Kohlberg's claims -- the stages are universal, in two senses: (a) all cultures and sub - cultures apply the same basic moral concepts to social relations and social institutions (concepts like love, respect, liberty, rules, truth, the value of life, punishment, reciprocity, and authority), and (b) all individuals, regardless of culture, go through the same stages of reasoning about these concepts in the same order, varying only in how quickly and how far they move through the stage sequence.

What are the six moral stages as they apply to altruism?

Stage 1

Stage 1 is the first of what Kohlberg calls the preconventional stages; it typically appears at around 5-6 years of age. At stage 1, what is right is obedience to the commands of authority inorder to avoid punishment. Altruism as a conscious and consistently felt obligation does not exist at this stage, although young children may be capable of empathy and spontaneous helping in particular situations. In general, only the powerful are seen as being responsible for the welfare of people; ordinary persons who do not have authority are responsible for helping only when commanded to do so by their superiors or by very definite rules. An individual at stage 1 denies responsibility for others even

when he is the cause of harm; he "can't help it," those in charge are to blame. "It would be pointless to blame me," Adolf Eichmann said, "I was merely a little cog in the machinery that carried out the directives of the German Reich." At stage 1, the beaten man on the Jericho roadside is a problem for the authorities, not the responsibility of a mere passerby.

Stage 2

At stage 2, which appears at around 7-8 years of age, everyone is considered to be responsible for his own welfare. You shouldn't interfere with other persons' rights, but you aren't obligated to take positive action on their behalf. People should look out for themselves. If they get into trouble, it's their problem, they probably asked for it or had it coming. This philosophy of self-interest, however, is tempered by the emergence of the first reasoned, though limited, altruism. At stage 2, the individual does feel responsible for those whom he identifies with, needs, or otherwise selfishly values, or who would pay him back for a favor. A husband should steal a drug to save his dying wife, some stage 2 subjects say, because he would miss her if she died and have to go to the trouble of finding a new wife. A boy should climb a tree to rescue a stranded kitten, a 2nd-grade girl said, because someday the boy might be tied up and the kitten would remember and help untie the ropes. I recently asked my 6½-year-old son why children should obey their parents. "Well," he said, "if you do what parents ask, then parents will do nice things for you -- like getting you a new Richie Rich comic."

"Well," I said, "suppose one day you asked Mom and me for a new

Richie Rich comic and we were in a grouchy mood and just said no, without any good reason. Then later that day, we asked you to do something for us, like vacuuming the dining room rug (a chore Mark often does). Do you think you should do it?"

"No" he said, "I don't think I should, because you didn't do something nice for me. That's just the way it works, Dad."

Stage 3

Stage 3, appearing at 9-10 years of age, marks the arrival of conventional morality. The earlier stage 2-responsibility for others that was limited by an ethic of you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours now broadens into a more general, less contingent concern for the welfare of others -- a belief in the Golden Rule. At stage 3, the individual feels obligated to do the nice thing, to behave in a way that meets the expectations of others. Three things limit the altruism of stage 3, however: first, a belief that it would be wrong to do something that is socially disapproved in order to help another; second , an exaggerated faith that conventional authorities will benevolently and omnisciently attend to the welfare of all persons; and third, a failure to generalize a sense of active responsibility beyond those to whom one has personal or group ties. Because of its parochial nature, stage 3 includes a lot of low-level soap-opera sympathy: one feels sorrier for a "persecuted" Lt. Calley than for the little yellow people he happened to kill.

Stage 3 also believes that the responsibility for evil consequences rests only with the evil-doer; it is not the actor's fault if evil occurs as long as he does not actually abet it. Edmund Burke must have had

stage 3 citizens in mind when he said that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. William Sloan Coffin, writing in the New York Times about the Watergate defendants, spoke to the inadequacy of stage 3 morality when he said that to do evil you do not need to be an evil person, only a nice guy who is not yet a good man.

For any of these limiting reasons, the priest and the Levite may have decided not to help the victim on the roadside: he was a stranger to them, others would understand if they did not stop, and anyhow the authorities would probably come to his aid.

Stage 4

At stage 4, which does not appear before adolescence, there emerges "the first full sense of positive responsibility for others" (Kohlberg, 1971). The personal relationship concerns of stage 3 are broadened into a sense of duty and place within a larger social system which assigns roles and responsibilities to all its members. Had it been the priest who stopped to help the stricken traveler, he may have done so out of a sense of priestly duty; or, in refraining from helping, he may have been acting in accordance with religious regulations demanding that he touch no human body for several hours prior to performing his temple functions. Being a good Stage-4 citizen prescribes wider responsibilities for others' welfare than did Stage 3, but Stage 4 altruism is also limited: one is not responsible for hurting others in the course of carrying out the duty with which one is charged; you shouldn't take over a job of helping that is assigned by society to someone else; you are

responsible only to help decent law-abiding citizens -- people who protest in the streets, for example, have it coming if they get clubbed by the police; moreover, you should never take the law into your own hands or challenge authority in order to help someone; and finally, one's responsibility at stage 4 is limited to those who are part of one's nation or social or authority system. America-firsters are often stage 4's.

Stage 5

Stage 5 is the first of what Kohlberg calls the postconventional moral stages, because they are based on rational considerations of moral obligation that are not dependent on group definitions of right and wrong. The postconventional stages, Kohlberg says, are reached in Western societies by only about 25% of adults and typically not until after age 20. Stage 5 is a major step toward universal altruism: it recognizes the rightness of concern for all human rights and the welfare of all persons involved in a situation. Stage 5 concern for the interest of others is limited, however, by considerations of contract: if, for example, the other person voluntarily enters into a transaction, he is responsible to foresee and avoid possible negative consequences to himself. Stage 5 does not, unless contractually committed, feel responsibility for the welfare of others beyond respect for the legal and natural rights due any member of society. If there is no legal way to help another, stage 5 feels no obligation to use illegal means to do so -- in the drug dilemma, for example, the husband would not be morally obliged to steal the drug, and thereby break the law, in order to prevent his wife's death.

Finally, stage 5 altruism tends to be utilitarian, following the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. Following such a principle may sometimes involve treating some persons as means rather than as ends; by utilitarian reasoning, the atomic destruction of several hundred thousand Japanese became the means of shortening a war and, so the argument goes, saving perhaps a million lives.

Stage 6

Stage 6 would rule out a Hiroshima, since, as exemplified by the good Samaritan, stage 6 consists of a fully universalized respect for all persons as ends in themselves. This universalized respect for persons is expressed by Joe, a 24-year-old subject in Kohlberg's longitudinal study, in his response to the drug-stealing dilemma; Joe says:

> It is the husband's duty to save his wife. The fact that her life is in danger transcends every other standard you might use to judge his action. Life is more important than property.
>
> SUPPOSE IT WERE A FRIEND, NOT HIS WIFE?
>
> I don't think that would be much different from a moral point of view. It's still a human being in danger.
>
> SUPPOSE IT WERE A STRANGER?
>
> To be consistent, yes, from a moral standpoint.
>
> WHAT IS THIS MORAL STANDPOINT?
>
> I think every individual has a right to live, and if there is a way of saving a person, he should

be saved.

At stage 6, one is responsible for avoiding harmful consequences to others even in the course of carrying out one's duties, be they prescribed by a commanding officer or by a president. If legal channels have been exhausted, then the actor has the responsibility to either change the law or consider the use of illegal means to help the victim of injustice. (Thus civil disobedience finds its justification and its motivation in the stage 6 idea that the law derives its just power only from moral principles, and that to disobey a law that degrades human personality -- as segregation did -- and to accept the penalty in order to arouse the conscience of the community, is in reality to express the highest respect for the law.)

The primary limitation of responsibility for others at stage 6 is justice: one is not morally obligated to do everything possible for the happiness of everyone in the world, but only to respect an individual's just claims, weighed against the just claims of other individuals, including a reasonable regard for one's own welfare. Stage 6 responsibility, in other words, would not require a person to give all that he has to the poor, just as it would not have required obligated the good Samaritan to intervene if the robbers still stood at their victim's side, ready to make any interloper a second casualty.

III. Moral Stage and Altruistic Behavior

Does moral stage predict actual altruistic behavior? Kohlberg (1969, 1975) has cited a number of studies showing reasonable con-

sistency between moral reasoning and moral action. One study (Haan, Smith, & Block, 1969) found that in the Milgram obedience experiment, 75% of a small group of stage 6 subjects refused to continue shocking the learner, compared to only 13% of the other 24 subjects at lower moral stages. A projective measure of sympathy, however, did not predict behavior; high-empathy subjects were no more likely to quit than low-empathy subjects. Cognitive definition of the moral requirements of the situation appeared to determine moral conduct, whereas level of emotional distress for the victim did not.

The study most relevant to the issue of moral stage and altruistic behavior was carried out by Shari McNamee and will appear in Kohlberg's edited collection of research on his theory (in preparation). The subject in McNamee's experiment faced a real-life dilemma. As he was about to enter a room to be interviewed, a young man, in reality a confederate, interrupted to say that he was scheduled to be the next participant in the study, but could not do it because he had just had a bad reaction to psychedelic drugs. He asked the experimenter to help him, but the experimenter replied that he was a researcher, not a therapist, and that he had no experience with drugs, making it obvious that he was displeased with the cancellation. After the subject made another plea for help, stating that he was confused and frightened, the experimenter said again that he couldn't help him, knew no place to refer him, and told him to call to reschedule his testing situation. The confederate then slowly left the room.

What were the responses of the subjects who witnessed this scene?

Subjects' reactions were classified into one of four categories: (1) no intervention to help; (2) statements of sympathy or protest; (3) informing the drug-user where he could go for assistance; (4) offering personal assistance such as taking the person home or to a place where he could get help. After the subject responded in one of these ways to the exchange between the experimenter and the confederate, he was interviewed for his reasoning about a series of Kohlberg moral dilemmas, and the interview was scored for stage of moral judgment.

What was the correspondence between moral stage and moral behavior? At stage 2, only 11% helped. At stage 3, 27% came to the drug-user's aid. At stage 4, 38% offered assistance, and at stage 5 the figure rose to 68%. At stage 6, fully 100% of the subjects intervened to help. Interestingly, after the purpose of the experiment was explained, 72% of all subjects said that at the time of the conflict they felt they should offer help, but only 44% of all subjects did in fact offer aid. The discrepancy between thinking one should offer help and actually making the decision to help was greatest at the lower moral stages, less at the higher stages, and non-existent at stage 6.

It is important to underscore in this context that a person can behave in opposite ways and still be consistent with his stage of moral reasoning. Some stage 3's helped the confederate because they felt it was the socially appropriate thing to do, whereas others did not help because they feared the experimenter's disapproval. Both were being consistent with their stage 3 thinking. The stage 3 individual who says he felt he should have helped but didn't is implicitly saying that he thought conforming

to the experimenter's expectations was more important then helping in this situation. The critical point here, often overlooked in the argument over whether moral judgment predicts behavior, is that a person may be behaving in a way that is consistent with his moral reasoning even if we cannot predict his course of action, and even if his moral choice varies from one situation to another. Consistency must be defined from the subject's point of view. Another factor contributing to behavioral variability is the fact that most people function at several developmental levels in their moral reasoning; which one governs their behavior will depend on the total constellation of forces operating in the situation at hand.

McNamee also asked both helping and non-helping subjects why they did what they did. Only 14% of non-helping persons said it was because they didn't know what to do. The greatest proportion, 46%, gave reasons in some way reflecting relating to the experimenter as the cause of their inaction -- their fear of his displeasure, their trust in his professional judgment, and so on. At stage 2, the most common reason for not helping was the feeling that the subject and the experimenter were not responsible for helping the drug-user: "He should have considered the consequences before he took the drugs. He should have had no reason to ask you for help." At stage 3, the most frequently reported cause of failure to help was fear of experimenter disapproval. At stage 4, a sense of role obligation --"you're the experimenter, I'm the subject"-- was most often cited as the reason for non-intervention. At stage 5, subjects who didn't help typically spoke in terms of their commitment to participate in the study, or in terms of doubts about their qualifications to offer assistance.

Among all subjects, lower-stage persons said they would be more apt to help a stranger than a friend, whereas this made much less difference to Stage 5 and 6 subjects. Lower-stage individuals were also much more likely to report that they were inhibited by the prospect of interfering and by the experimenter's authority. Non-helping subjects said things like, "I was under your ruling force," or, "Between us, it was the controller and the controlled," or, "Sometimes it's your duty to stay out of a situation," or, "I was just following directions." By contrast, a stage 6 subject said, "I felt a strong obligation to complete the experiment and not waste your time. But that did not take precedence over something important like this."

To develop altruistic behavior, then, you should develop a person's stage of moral reasoning. Kohlberg and his colleagues (Kohlberg, 1975; Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971; Selman, 1975) have experimented with various strategies for promoting moral stage advance in settings ranging from schools to prisons. Successful strategies have included precipitating conflict and uncertainty in the person's present stage of moral reasoning, exposing him to moral thinking one stage above his own, and improving the moral atmosphere, that is, the justice structure, of the social institution or environment in which the individual functions. The common denominator of all these techniques is their provision of what Kohlberg calls "role-taking opportunities," opportunities for taking the attitudes of others, becoming aware of their thoughts and feelings, having to reconcile different points of view. Role-taking is clearly related to the development of a sense of justice, in that justice seeks to consider

and resolve the competing claims of all persons.

IV. Conclusion: Beyond Morality

Having made the case for the importance of moral reasoning in the development of altruism, I would like to conclude by suggesting that morality is not the whole story. To do this, I would like to turn again to Shari McNamee's study. Of her 90 subjects, only 6 -- one out of 15-- offered personal assistance to the distressed individual, such as offering to take him home or somewhere where he could get help, rather than simply referring him. Three of the 23 subjects who were stage 5 offered such personal help, as did 3 of the 5 persons who were stage 6. It may well be that personal involvement of this kind went beyond what even stage 6 subjects considered to be morally required in this situation. If altruism does in fact place the interest of the other above the interest of the self, sometimes even to the exclusion of self-interest, then altruism by definition exceeds the moral obligations felt even at the highest moral stages. Even at stage 6, the welfare of the self remains a legitimate consideration in deciding the right thing to do. Recall that the altruism of the good Samaritan had an excessive quality: he bound up the wounds of the beaten man with his own hands, put him on his beast, carried him to an inn, and left money for his care, making it clear to the innkeeper that if further financial needs arose, he would gladly meet them. One senses, too, that if the Samaritan had witnessed the robbing and beating of the traveler, he would have risked his own safety to intervene. Altruism goes the second mile. A cognitive-developmental account of altruistic behavior, then, needs to recognize that altruism of the highest sort may compel what moral reasoning

does not: altruism expands concern for others beyond the bounds of moral obligation into the realm of love. A universalized sense of justice may be a necessary antecedent of universal love, but there appear to be other well-springs of the kind of selfless, generous compassion that is the mark of the good Samaritan.

It seems likely that the kind of universal goodwill that sacrifices self-interest and seeks nothing in return -- what the Greeks called agapé -- is nurtured in development by life experiences that make a strong impact on feeling as well as on thought, experiences that give cognition the passion and the courage of conviction that is needed to turn principle into action. It was for example, his passionate commitment to a philosophy of universal love that allowed Martin Luther King (1963) to say to his enemies,

> Do to us what you will, and we shall still love you. We cannot in good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. But throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you.

I would submit that a love ethic, like a justice ethic, is fundamentally a matter of cognitive development, of how you come to define your relationship to and responsibility for other human beings. The basic idea of cognitive-developmental approach to altruism is that to have a good heart, one that holds out justice and compassion for all persons, you must first develop a good mind.

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